

Bulk Charging of Dielectrics in Cryogenic Space Environments

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35 Word Abstract

We use a 1-D bulk charging model to evaluate dielectric charging at cryogenic temperatures relevant to space systems using passive cooling to <100K or extended operations in permanently dark lunar craters and the lunar night.

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INTRODUCTION

Internal electrostatic discharges (IESD) originating in dielectric materials charged during exposure to the space radiation environment accounts for over half of the anomalies and failures of spacecraft and space systems that have been attributed to the space environment [1]. Charge accumulation is particularly important at cryogenic temperatures because the electrical conductivity σ for semiconductors and insulating materials generally exhibits a $\sim 1/T^N$ temperature dependence where N depends on the material and physical mechanism for electrical conductivity (which varies with temperature). The reduced conductivity at low temperatures greatly limits current flow from the charged dielectric allowing charge densities to accumulate for longer periods of time. This effect increases the risk of dielectric breakdown and IESD due to the enhanced electric fields generated by the buried charge.

Space systems operating at cryogenic temperatures are found in a number of applications [2]. One example is infrared and microwave astronomy missions because low operating temperatures reduce the background of long wavelength photons and increase the sensitivity of infrared and microwave sensors. Passive cooling to $\sim 70\text{K}$ is currently used by the Wilkerson Microwave Anisotropy Probe spacecraft in orbit about the Sun-Earth L2 point and will also be used to cool the instrument systems on the James Webb Space Telescope to $\sim 40\text{K}$ (also bound for L2). Passive cooling technologies represent a particular threat to charging because the requirement that systems be exposed to the cold background of space to achieve low operating temperatures also means they are exposed to the space radiation environment responsible for charging. Cold environments will also be encountered in future lunar exploration where lunar night time temperatures of approximately 85K are observed immediately before sunrise [3,4] and temperatures as low as 40K to 50K will be encountered in the permanently dark craters at the lunar poles [5,6,7]. Radiation environments at lunar and L2 distances are generally considered relatively benign compared to the extreme bulk charging environments within the Earth's radiation belts. However, evaluation of bulk charging is an important step in the design and qualification of space systems. This is particularly true for systems at cryogenic temperatures because of the potential threat of enhanced charging due to the reduced conductivity of insulating materials at cold temperatures.

We first describe a bulk charging model developed for evaluating electrostatic discharge risk in insulating materials exposed to radiation environments. We use the model to evaluate the electric fields generated in cold insulators exposed to interplanetary radiation environments applicable for both the earth-sun L2 and lunar destinations. The model results are used as a screening tool; demonstrating the order of magnitude charging risks anticipated for standard aerospace insulating materials at both ambient and cold conditions.

BULK CHARGING MODEL AND SIMULATION RESULTS

The 1-dimensional bulk charging model is a modified version of the NUMIT (for "numerical integration") code originally developed by the late Dr. Robb Frederickson [8,9] using the radiation induced conductivity approach [10] for solving the charging equations

$$\nabla \cdot E = \rho / \epsilon \quad (1)$$

$$\frac{\partial \rho}{\partial t} = -\nabla \cdot (J_R + J_C) \quad (2)$$

where ρ is the charge density, E the electric field, J_R and J_C the incident radiation current density and conduction currents, respectively, and the dielectric permittivity ϵ is related to the permittivity in free space ϵ_0 and dielectric constant κ through the relationship $\epsilon = \kappa \epsilon_0$. Conduction currents are defined as

$$J_C = \sigma E = \left(\sigma_{dark} + K \left(\frac{dy}{dt} \right)^\alpha \right) E \quad (3)$$

where the bulk conductivity σ is divided into two terms: the σ_{dark} conductivity in the absence of exposure to radiation and a radiation induced conductivity (RIC) term which depends on the dose rate dy/dt and material dependent conductivity coefficient K and exponent α . Material electrical properties which are temperature dependent include σ , κ , and to a lesser extent the RIC parameters K and α .

NUMIT solves equations (1) to (3) numerically yielding self-consistent solutions for the electric fields generated by the charge density deposited in insulating materials exposed to the space radiation environment. We have modified NUMIT to extend the original fixed radiation current and mono-energetic electron energy input to allow for reading a time series of electron flux data from spacecraft measurements. In addition, options for electron flux input to the model includes use of mono-energetic flux from individual energy channels as well as spectral fits to extend the spectra to arbitrary energies or use of a complete spectrum. The mono-energetic flux option is used for its simplicity in the examples given here. Radiation current inputs are derived from ~ 9.13 years of 245 keV electron flux measurements at L1 by the Deflected Electrons (DE) detector component of the Energetic, Proton, and Alpha Monitor (EPAM) instrument on board the Advanced Composition Explorer (ACE) spacecraft. Transport of the radiation environment into the dielectric material required to obtain the charge deposition and dose rates are accomplished using look-up tables for dose as a function of depth [11,12]. This method provides a computationally efficient method for updating dose rates and charge deposition at each simulation time step.

We adopt the representative electrical parameters given in Table 1. Dielectric conductivity at cryogenic temperatures ($T < 100K$) compared to values at ambient temperatures ($T \sim 300K$) suggest conductivity ratios for polymers of interest to aerospace applications are $\sigma_B(T \leq 100K) / \sigma_B(T \sim 300K) \sim 10^{-2}$ to 10^{-5} [13,14] and the dielectric constants increase over the same temperature range by factors of $K_{T \leq 100K} / K_{T \sim 300K} \sim 1$ to 2 [15,16,17,14].

Table 1. Dielectric Electrical Properties

Property	300K	100K
σ	1.00×10^{-16} S/m	1.00×10^{-19} S/m
κ	3.71	7.42
K	2.76×10^{-16} S/m	2.76×10^{-16} S/m
α	1.00	1.00

Output from NUMIT for $T \sim 300K$ conditions is shown in Figure 1. Electric field magnitude and charge density as a function of depth in the insulator is given in the top two panels. Electron current density (blue) of the 139 keV charging electron beam (black) is given in the third panel. The bottom panel is the maximum (black) and minimum (blue) electric field extracted from the results in the top panel. The orange and red lines provide guidance on the approximate nominal and extreme electric fields, respectively, where dielectric failure may occur based on $\sim 1 \times 10^8$ V/m dielectric strengths (red) reported in the literature for many polymers [18] and a more conservative $\sim 1 \times 10^7$ V/m value (orange) suggested for use in space applications [19]. In this example we demonstrate that exposure to 139 keV electrons at $T \sim 300K$ may charge the material to values approaching the lower breakdown strength but never exceeding critical values for dielectric failure. Charge densities and electric fields within the material are elevated only when directly exposed to the high flux events and the electric fields rapidly decay with time constants on the order of days when the electron flux decreases to background values.

Charging results for the $T \sim 100K$ electrical properties from Table 1 are given in Figure 2. Reducing the conductivity and increasing the dielectric constant to values appropriate for cryogenic conditions increases the charging time constant ($\tau \sim \kappa \epsilon_0 / \sigma$) to such a large value that the dielectric integrates charge over the complete exposure period and electric fields approach the breakdown strengths of polymers in environments generally considered relatively benign for bulk charging.

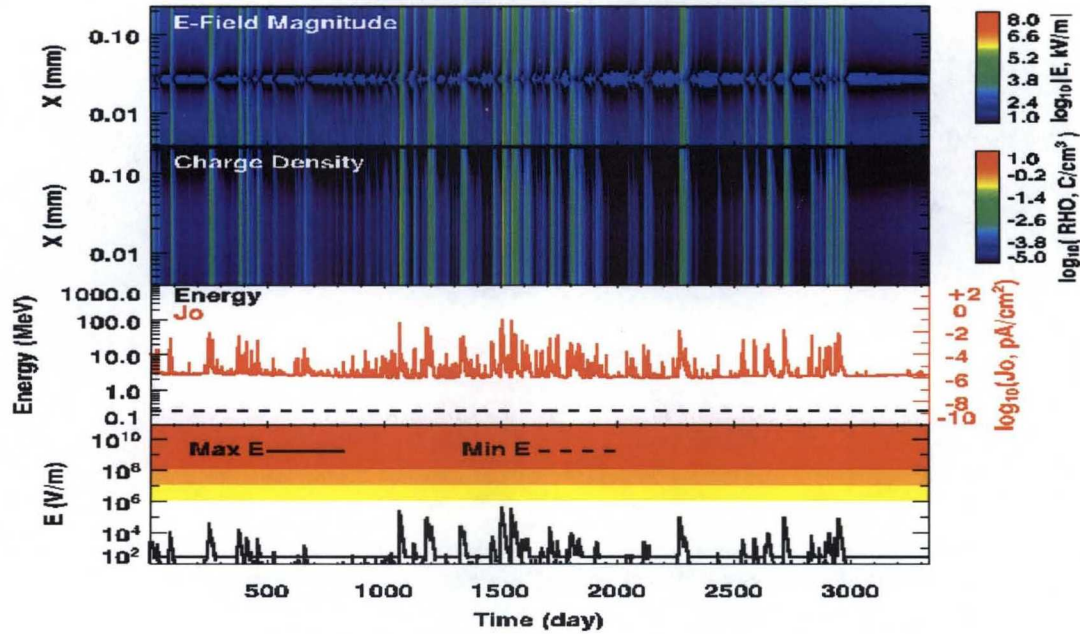


Figure 1. NUMIT T ~ 300K Results. A ~ 0.23 mm thick dielectric is exposed to 245 keV electrons for ~ 9.13 years with only moderate charging results during the high electron flux events.

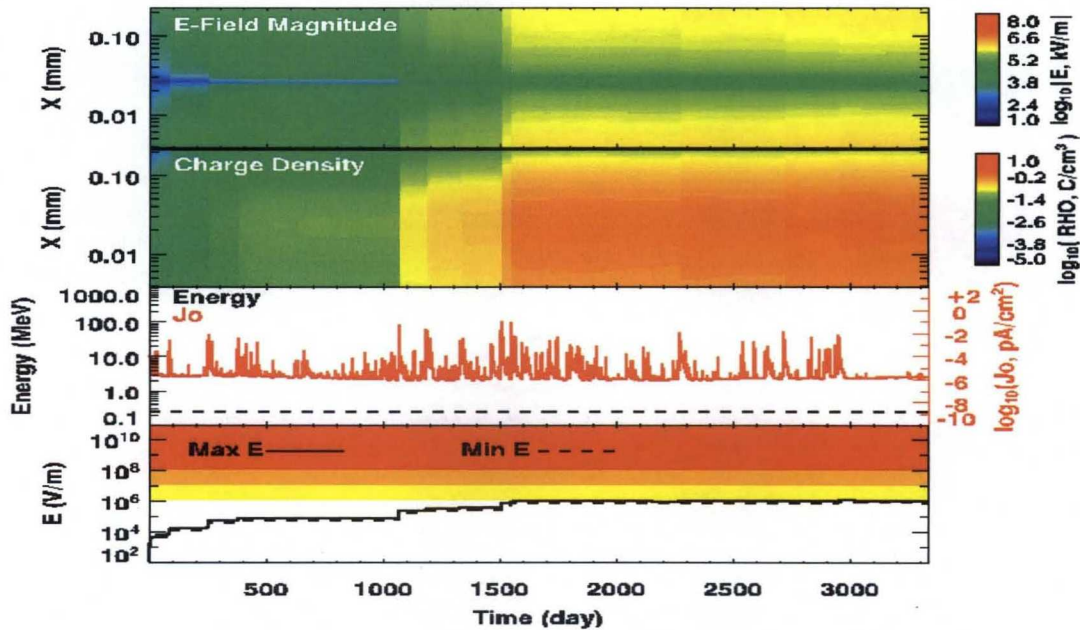


Figure 2. NUMIT T ~ 100K Results. Conductivity and dielectric constants are modified to the $T \sim 100\text{K}$ values in Table 1 with more extreme charging due to the greater charging time constants at lower temperatures. Equilibrium electric fields are still less than breakdown in this example.

CONCLUSIONS

We have described an application of the NUMIT 1-dimensional bulk charging model for evaluating radiation charging of dielectric materials in space environments. Novel features of the modified version

of the NUMIT model include the capability of reading long (~years) electron flux time series for use in screening environments for potential risk of electrostatic discharge when dielectric materials are exposed to the radiation environment at both ambient and cryogenic temperatures. The model facilitates bulk charging evaluations for spacecraft design and operations support as well as anomaly analyses when appropriate environment data is available. In addition, the model provides a useful tool for evaluation of total radiation dose, dose rate, and electric field effects. This information can be used to define parameters for incident electron beams in laboratory test protocols for the qualification of materials for space environments.

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